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ABSTRACT

Concern with academic freedom in the speech communication classroom is concern with the aims, matter, and methods of teaching. Academic freedom is a condition of relatively unconstrained inquiry and instruction upon which the pursuit and transmission of knowledge depend. Three ideas are worth noting: (1) academic freedom is grounded in some basic conception of the function or mission of the academy; (2) this mission historically has been understood as the creation and dissemination of knowledge; and (3) stress on the external element in academic freedom invites faculty to ignore an equally important internal element. Academic freedom involves not only a relative absence of external constraints; it must also be understood as an absence of internal constraints on inquiry and teaching. This understanding of the necessary conditions for inquiry and learning calls attention to the mental aspects of freedom: to the attitudes that are requisite to genuine questioning, experimentation, testing of ideas, and knowing. The intrapersonal aspect of academic freedom comprises a pair of mental habits or attitudes--the commitments to growth and adventure. Implications can be examined in three areas: the aims or objectives of instruction, the content of coursework, and the methods by which that content is managed. If individuals are genuinely committed to the ideal of academic freedom, they must strive for it themselves every bit as vigorously as they attempt to nurture it in students. For scholars and teachers, the highest responsibility is to strive to be free. (MG)

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ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN THE SPEECH COMMUNICATION CLASSROOM:

TOWARD AN ETHICS FOR TEACHING

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ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN THE SPEECH COMMUNICATION CLASSROOM: TOWARD AN ETHICS FOR TEACHING

> Let us admit the case of the conservative: if we once start thinking no one can guarantee where we shall come out, except that many objects, ends and institutions are doomed. Every thinker puts some portion of an apparently stable world in peril and no one can wholly predict what will emerge in its place.
>
> --John Dewey

This examination of the idea of academic freedom in the speech communication classroom has its genesis in an interest that is at once professional and personal. As one whose scholarly efforts have concentrated principally on ethical issues in communication, I am curious about the implications for pedagogical practice of a commitment to preserving and exercising freedom. And as a teacher at the university level for more than twenty years, I have sought to determine what obligations and responsibilities I have to my students. What, indeed, does any of us owe her or his students in the faithful execution of our professional duties?

The matters of instructional responsibilities and obligations are sharply focussed when one considers a particular sort of classroom undertaking--the teaching of teachers how to teach.

For when I supervise the work and development of graduate instructors--as I did for several years--I am confronted with the double task of inculcating in them a respect for and an ability to foster academic freedom in their own classes and of realizing these aims myself. In short, I must practice what I teach.

Clearly, academic freedom is a principal foundation of what we do, both as teachers and as scholars. But how are we to conceive this idea? How does it bear on the enterprise of teaching, and particularly on teaching speech? The general thesis of this paper is that the requirement to nurture and sustain academic freedom in the classroom creates obligations for the teacher, and that these obligations form the ethical framework within which the educational enterprise is to be undertaken. When balanced with the demands of disciplinary integrity, these obligations constitute the principles by which the teacher of speech must be guided in classroom practice.

Concern with academic freedom in the classroom is actually concern with the aims, matter, and methods of teaching. Historically, external threats to this freedom have involved pressure from outside the classroom to teach (or not to teach) certain content in certain ways with certain objectives. Clearly, academic freedom becomes an issue whenever any interest-group, either within or outside the university, seeks to influence what is taught in the classroom and how it is taught. Efforts to preserve academic freedom, consequently, will necessarily be concerned with such matters. My aims, then, are to examine the

concept of academic freedom and to consider some implications of this concept for teaching speech. For the purpose of illustrating these implications, I shall consider the idea of academic freedom as it applies to the basic public speaking course.

A brief review of the concept of academic freedom reveals several significant points. Traditionally, the idea has been understood as a condition for doing research and for teaching in which external constraints on the pursuit of truth and knowledge are minimized. Ralph F. Fuchs, for example, observes that

> academic freedom is that freedom of members of the academic community, assembled in colleges and universities, which underlies the effective performance of their functions of teaching, learning, practice of the arts, and research. The right to academic freedom is recognized in order to enable faculty members and students to carry on their roles.[1]

Similarly, Ernest van den Haag notes that "academic freedom is an extra-constitutional, intra-academic privilege which protects professors not against legal punishment but against threats of dismissal arising from the fulfillment of their duty to form and profess their views independently."[2]

Three ideas here are worth noting. First, academic freedom is grounded in some basic conception of the function or mission of the academy. Indeed, it is seen as a condition necessary to the fulfillment of that mission. Second, this mission historically has been understood as the creation and dissemination of

knowledge.[3] Academic freedom, then, is a condition of relatively unconstrained inquiry and instruction upon which the pursuit and transmission of knowledge depend. Clearly, all such activity will be constrained in some ways--economically, temporally, and by ignorance, for example. The essential element in academic freedom is that study and teaching not be constrained by concern for ideological conformity and academic orthodoxy. Third, the condition of academic freedom is typically viewed in terms of protection against external constraints on inquiry and instruction. The great majority of writing that deals with this concept, most particularly that which examines political threats to academic freedom during the 1950's and '60's, emphasizes the importance of protecting faculty from "outside agencies" that would subject research and teaching to political and ideological control.

It is this third point with which I am most concerned. Stress on the external element in academic freedom invites us to ignore an equally important internal element. Academic freedom involves not only a relative absence of external constraints; it must also be understood as an absence of internal--that is to say, psychological--constraints on inquiry and teaching. Emerson and Haber remark that the effective performance of the university's function "demands free inquiry and experimentation; encouragement of questioning, skepticism, and probing; and the development of a critical attitude not only toward current knowledge and values, but toward authority generally, including the authority of the teacher."[4] This understanding of the

necessary conditions for inquiry and learning calls our attention to the mental aspects of freedom: to the "attitudes" that are requisite to genuine questioning, experimentation, testing of ideas, and knowing. On this view, we should look for threats to freedom not only in the political and social conditions within which research and instruction are undertaken, but also--and perhaps more significantly--in the spirit in which these are undertaken. "The main danger to academic freedom," writes van den Haag,

> is not actual outside interference, but an inside desire to please, motivated in part by the actual or presumed need of the institution for the good opinion of those who might support it financially. In the United States, neither people nor institutions like to be out of step with public opinion. Universities thus care for their public image; and departments, and professors, for popularity.[5]

For students as well as faculty, the most important limitations on academic freedom are internal rather than external. The emphasis on grades in the culture of the modern American university has led, among other things, to a mentality of conformism among students. The desire to "do well" (that is, to get a "good grade") has fostered, not an impulse to question and challenge ideas and assertions, but to find out what is expected and then to perform dutifully in accordance with those perceived expectations. If academic freedom is threatened in the university today, it is threatened not so much by politicians and

social forces as by timidity and avoidance of risk-taking by both faculty and students.

The conception of academic freedom to be examined here, then, emphasizes this internal element--the "attitude of scholarship" or "spirit of inquiry"--and seeks to illuminate its implications for teaching in the speech communication classroom. The inspiration for the present conception is the work of John Dewey, whose philosophy of education continues to influence instructional theory here and abroad. "Regarding freedom," he writes in Democracy and Education, "the important thing to bear in mind is that it designates a mental attitude rather than external unconstraint of movements. . . ."[6]

Two components of this attitude are especially pertinent to the present investigation. The first we might call the "habit of growth," a disposition to resist complacency and to explore new channels of thought and investigation. "In other words," Dewey writes,

> freedom in its practical and moral sense (whatever is to be said about it in some metaphysical sense) is connected with possibility of growth, learning and modification of character. . . . As we mature we usually acquire habits that are settled to the point of routine. But unless and until we get completely fossilized, we can break old habits and form new ones. . . . Freedom in the practical sense develops when one is aware of this possibility and takes an interest in converting it into a reality. Potentiality of

> freedom is a native gift or part of our constitution in that we have capacity for growth and for being actively concerned in the process and the direction it takes. Actual or positive freedom is not a native gift or endowment but is acquired. In the degree in which we become aware of possibilities of development and actively concerned to keep the avenues of growth open, in the degree in which we fight against induration and fixity, and thereby realize the possibilities of recreation of our selves, we are actually free.[7]

The second component of the attitude of freedom might be referred to as the "habit of adventure." Asking questions is risky, and not only in the political sense. To inquire, to challenge, to seek alternative positions and novel perspectives jeopardizes one's intellectual status quo and creates the possibility that beliefs and convictions that define one's worldview will be modified, or even rejected, and replaced by uncertainty and confusion. The willingness to embark on such a course requires that one confront and accept the personal intellectual risks inherent in it. According to Dewey,

> Surrender of what is possessed, disowning of what supports one in secure ease, is involved in all inquiry and discovery; the latter implicate an individual still to make, with all the risks implied therein. For to arrive at new truth and vision is to alter. The old self is put off and the new self is

> only forming, and the form it finally takes will depend upon the unforeseeable result of an adventure. No one discovers a new world without forsaking an old one; and no one discovers a new world who exacts a guarantee in advance for what it shall be, or who puts the act of discovery under bonds with respect to what the new world shall do to him when it comes into vision.[8]

The intrapersonal aspect of academic freedom, then, comprises this pair of mental habits or attitudes--the commitments to growth and adventure. For, whatever the external conditions in which inquiry might be undertaken, it will not be undertaken unless one is willing to overcome psychological tendencies toward stability and security. I take these habits to be starting points in any consideration of academic freedom and teaching in the discipline of speech. For these are the essential conditions upon which unrestricted inquiry and, hence, the discovery and sharing of knowledge depend. My task now is to illuminate the implications of these ideas for teaching through an examination of their application in the basic speech course.

These implications can be examined in three areas: the aims or objectives of instruction, the content of coursework, and the methods by which that content is managed. First, then, what instructional objectives for the public speaking course are implicit in a commitment to the conception of academic freedom outlined above? Presumably, since this course is fundamentally

performance-oriented, objectives must center on the development in the student of the skills involved in preparing and presenting effective oral messages to particular audiences. How is this understanding of course aims to be integrated with the demand for nurturing academic freedom in the classroom--that is, for cultivating in students the habits of growth and adventure?

These habits are premised on the need for flexibility and acceptance of uncertainty, on the idea that in the world of human affairs things are not fixed and settled, but are dynamic and to some extent unpredictable.[9] The key to integrating this perspective with the aims of the basic speech course lies in the idea of "skill" in the art of speaking. To be skilled in any art is to have proficiency in employing the techniques of that art. Such proficiency is not merely a matter of knowing the techniques, but also the artistic principles that guide one in their use. The main point here concerns adaptability: students must be brought to understand that skill in speaking is not merely a matter of knowing the "right moves," but of knowing how to determine which "moves" or techniques are appropriate (within generally acknowledged ethical constraints) to a given set of circumstances. This determination is both challenging and problematic: challenging because novel circumstances require novel adaptations of technique, and problematic because of the uncertainty that inevitably attends any decision as to what will be appropriate. The primary objective of the basic speech course, viewed in this light, will indeed be to help the student develop skill in speaking, but this must be understood as

including the development of an awareness of the flexibility and tolerance of uncertainty with which speaking techniques are to be employed.

Such a conception of course objectives to some extent anticipates course content. A public speaking course that seeks simultaneously to help one develop skill in communicating and to foster a spirit of free inquiry must certainly concern itself with the standard materials of speech: situation, audience, generation and selection of rhetorical devices, arrangement of subject matter, style, delivery, and so on. But it must consider also the rationale for such materials, and for the principles of their effective use. For if one is to encourage students to question, to doubt, to consider novel possibilities for thinking and acting, he or she must also treat subject matter as problematic, that is, as open to question and challenge, and as requiring justification. Only when a teacher treats material as requiring justification does she or he remove it from the realm of "the given" and create from it opportunities for students to develop the habits of exploration and testing that are at the heart of intellectual freedom.

In practical, pedagogical terms, this may mean, for example, that instruction in public speaking will include consideration of the historical and social context of public utterance--of such issues as free speech and its role in a democratic polity, the relationship between speech and public life, and the historical connection between the art of public speaking (that is, rhetoric) and responsible citizenship. This is not to say

that the basic speech course must be primarily a study of the history of rhetoric; it is to say, however, that a course that ignores the broader context within which communication techniques are developed and utilized fails to inculcate in students a sense of the relationship between skill in speech and their own political well-being. Beyond this, it fails to provide an opportunity for students to re-examine their comparatively restricted perspectives and to extend themselves, to develop an enlarged awareness of the world in which they must live and act. It is this heightened consciousness that, for Dewey, is the heart of growth or expansion. It is also, therefore, the heart of academic freedom as conceived herein.

Finally, what are the implications of this conception for the <u>methods</u> of instruction? In this area, I believe, one discovers the greatest challenge we face as teachers of speech, for here we consider the most personal dimension of what we do. Indeed, our teaching methods <u>are</u> what we do, or how we do it. How am I obliged to teach if I am to fulfill my responsibility to my students and to my profession to nurture the habit of freedom? How can I best induce my students to wonder, to question, to doubt, to transcend themselves, to embark upon a quest for genuine, personal knowledge of themselves and the world? It seems clear to me that one cannot do so by purely traditional methods of lecture and discussion in which, after having presented material, the instructor asks questions designed to determine how fully students have understood it. Rather, teaching must be genuinely interactive; it must engage

the student, encourage her/him to challenge what is taught, induce perplexity and confusion. And how is this to be done? There are undoubtedly a number of ways, each suited to particular styles of teaching. One way that I have found to be productive is to challenge the students themselves to examine the premises of the course. "How do you know," I ask them, "that what I've told you is true? How do you know that this whole approach to the study of speaking isn't a sham, and that it hasn't been a waste of your time and money?" I do not have an answer for them, nor am I disappointed if they don't come up with answers themselves. Answers should not be easy. The students ought to be unsettled by my questions. That sort of unsettledness is precisely what will induce them to rethink things for themselves, perhaps even to rethink the rationale for their entire education. I hope that they become confused and unsure. That is the first step toward developing the habits of growth and adventure that are the subjective side of academic freedom.

Now perhaps this approach will not be right for everyone, but if we are to fulfill our obligation to promote freedom in the classroom, we must find some method of putting the onus for learning onto the student. At the center of that method will be the act of questioning--genuine, open-ended questioning with no "right" answer being sought. This is the only way I know of to teach freedom.

There is one last implication that seems to require consideration. It, too, has to do with course content and pedagogical

practice, but it has more to do with the instructor's orientation toward them than with their effects on the student. It seems to me that if one is genuinely committed to the ideal of academic freedom, he or she must strive for it every bit as vigorously as he or she attempts to nurture it in students. This suggests that one's attitude toward one's own teaching must be rooted in a commitment. I must approach my material and my technique in the same spirit of growth and adventure as I would excite in my students. And this means that my attitude toward my teaching must be as tentative, as flexible, as innovative, as fraught with uncertainty as are other academic activities. To the extent that one teaches out of habit, that management of classroom responsibilities becomes routinized--"fossilized," in Dewey's idiom--and predictable and unchanging, one fails to meet the demands of freedom. And this failure violates not just a teacher's obligations to students, but also to oneself and to the profession.

So what does all this come to in the end? My aim here has not been to prescribe for my readers how they ought to teach. If one is to respect the idea of freedom developed here, one must respect the autonomy of one's colleagues. Rather, I have sought to call attention to an important, but neglected, facet of academic freedom and to explore some of the possibilities for teaching that derive from it. I do believe that we have obligations to our students, ourselves, and our profession when we agree to teach speech. And I believe that these obligations are

rooted in large measure in the freedom we claim as academics to inquire and to teach as we judge we should in the pursuit of knowledge.

When academic freedom is viewed in such terms, the greatest obligation we have is to exercise it. As scholars and as teachers, our highest responsibility is to strive be free.

ENDNOTES

1. Ralph F. Fuchs, "Academic Freedom--Its Basic Philosophy, Function, and History," in Hans W. Baade, ed., Academic Freedom: The Scholar's Place in Modern Society (Dobbs Ferry, New York: Oceana Publications, Inc., 1964), p. 1.

2. Ernest van den Haag, "Academic Freedom in the United States," in Baade, ed., Academic Freedom, p. 85. He writes in the same passage of the "atmosphere of freedom which should prevail on a campus," and notes (p. 87) that "where an outside body has [the power to decide what should be studied and taught], academic freedom is limited de facto by the tolerance of this outside authority; de iure it does not exist."

3. See, for instance, Albert Nolan, O. P., Academic Freedom: A Service to the People, T. B. Davis Memorial Lecture, University of Capetown, July 31, 1986. He writes (p. 5) that "the unique function of a university is the pursuit of knowledge in all its forms." This formulation has been expanded by some writers to include the use of such knowledge to direct social change. Emerson and Haber write that "the university is generally conceived as performing two main functions in a democratic society. One is the transmission of existing knowledge and values to the oncoming generation. The other is the critical re-examination of such knowledge and values, with a view to facilitating orderly change in society." Thomas I. Emerson and

David Haber, "Academic Freedom of the Faculty Member as Citizen," in Baade, ed., Academic Freedom, p. 117.

4. Emerson and Haber, "Academic Freedom of the Faculty Member as Citizen," p. 118.

5. van den Haag, "Academic Freedom in the U. S.," p. 89. It should also be noted that, in addition to concern about social acceptance and popularity with students, scholarly inquiry may be constrained by a reluctance to pursue lines of research and to advance views that fall outside the "mainstream" as determined by editorial boards and by promotion and tenure committees. Although grounds for this assertion are at this point primarily impressionistic and anecdotal, it is not to be dismissed easily. With a limited supply of journal pages being sought by increasing numbers of scholars, and with promotion and tenure decisions resting increasingly on research productivity (as measured by the number of publications), there is a danger that scholars are subtly coerced into doing mainly "safe" research--that is, research on "popular" or "trendy" topics or reflecting widely accepted conceptual and methodological paradigms. In this respect, the scholar's "spirit of freedom" is vulnerable to oppression in the same way that the student's is limited by concern about grades.

6. John Dewey, Democracy and Education (New York: The Free Press, 1966), p. 305. Similarly, he writes in another place

that "the commonest mistake made about freedom is, I think, to identify it with freedom of movement, or with the external or physical side of activity. Now, this external and physical side of activity cannot be separated from the internal side . . ; from freedom of thought, desire, and purpose." Experience and Education (New York: Collier Books, 1963), p. 61.

7. John Dewey, Theory of the Moral Life (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1960), pp. 171-172.

8. John Dewey, Experience and Nature (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1958), pp. 246-247.

9. That Dewey's conception of freedom implicates such ideas is made clear, among other places, in The Quest for Certainty (New York: Capricorn Books, 1960). See especially Chap. IV: "The Art of Acceptance and the Art of Control."